

April 11, 2017

Subject: Integrated Regional Conservation and Development Program –
Project Proposal to Wildlife Conservation Board

Reporting Period: February 2017 – April 2017

Staff Lead: Dennis Grossman, Strategic Growth Council

Recommended Action:

For information only – no action required.

Background:

SGC is advancing the Integrated Regional Conservation and Development (IRCAD) program, as directed by the October 2014 Council resolution. An interagency IRCAD team was established to (a) advance standards for different components of the IRCAD program, (b) evaluate the success of current and past regional conservation efforts across the State, (c) review the data and technology support required for the broad implementation of this program, and (d) refine this integrated regional planning approach through demonstration projects.

The California Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) completed their Strategic Plan in 2014. This Plan identifies the need to follow a State Conservation Vision with a transparent and replicable scientific process to guide future WCB conservation investments. WCB had requested a proposal from SGC to help implement their Strategic Plan by supporting the development of the State Conservation Vision through the implementation of Regional Conservation Assessments.

Update:

The proposal that SGC submitted to WCB was formally approved at their February 23rd Board meeting. The Strategic Growth Council looks forward to coordinating these project activities in partnership with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), California Biodiversity Council, and conservation leadership represented in the IRCAD Interagency Working Group. The Interagency Working Group includes participants from CDFW, Caltrans, Department of Conservation, California Energy Commission, California Department of Water Resources, UC Davis, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, The Nature Conservancy, and the SGC.

The Project Summary is included in the following pages:

Project Summary: Advancing the Use of Regional Conservation Assessments to Support the Mission of the Wildlife Conservation Board

Background

California has long been recognized as a global biodiversity hotspot, hosting a rich diversity of endemic species and ecosystems across its complex and varied landscapes. The conservation of these resources requires a comprehensive planning approach to ensure their protection in light of our need to accommodate increasing population, stimulate economic growth, generate energy, produce food, sustain renewable resources, develop infrastructure, and adapt to climate change across the State.

Since its establishment in 1947, the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) has focused on statewide habitat conservation priorities and priority landscapes that represent California's major ecoregions. The 2014 WCB Strategic Plan identifies the importance of a "State Conservation Vision" to guide the fulfillment of WCB's mission in the future. The Strategic Plan also notes that WCB does not have sufficient conservation science capacity to guide its work. WCB Board members, management and staff, and conservation partners have identified the need for a new, multi-agency initiative to inform WCB's priorities in the future.

The Strategic Growth Council (SGC) was created in statute to support sustainable communities, social equity and environmental stewardship through the coordination of state agency activities. SGC similarly identified the importance of a State Conservation Vision in 2014, and launched the Integrated Regional Conservation and Development (IRCAD) program to advance this objective. The IRCAD initiative has been endorsed through resolutions of the SGC and the California Biodiversity Council, and is being advanced through a multi-agency working group.

Project Concept

SGC will develop information and tools to inform WCB conservation investments. In coordination with CDFW, the SGC will implement Regional Conservation Assessments (RCAs) consistent with the State Conservation Vision. Two ecoregional demonstration pilots will be completed consistent with the establishment of RCA guidelines and as part of developing practical conservation information and assessment tools.

SGC will build an information portal and technology platform for broad access to the conservation products and assessment tools. The foundational datasets, as well as products from the conservation assessments will be available to inform all planning activities across the pilot ecoregions. SGC, in conjunction with DFW, will create customized tools to support program and project objectives of the Wildlife Conservation Board.

Project Components

RCA Standards and Methods. The projects will help define RCA standards and methods to identify conservation targets, develop conservation goals, determine conservation values, and map the distribution of these values for individual targets and groups of targets across an ecoregion. Dataset development, which will help inform strategies for priority conservation actions, will include (a) opportunity factors (e.g. landscape integrity, connectivity and corridors,

and ownership), (b) threat factors (e.g. probability for development and land use change, invasive species, climate change), and (c) co-benefit values of conserving ecosystem services (e.g. carbon, water and agricultural lands). This effort will help inform and complement CDFW work on RCA guideline development for AB 2087, and will draw from biological and ecological data from CDFW and other sources (e.g. CNDDDB, ACE 2, BIOS, NCCPs, distribution models, vegetation and land cover maps, etc.).

Conservation Value Maps. These maps are an important information component of RCAs and help identify broad areas within an ecoregion that provide opportunities for the sustainable conservation of a defined set of species and ecosystems. These maps are designed to provide a standardized context that will support the coordinated development and implementation of project-level conservation solutions within the ecoregion. One standard map product will portray broadly recognized conservation values for the ecoregion, while a second standard map product will represent aggregate conservation values for species and ecosystems that are legally protected or recognized for conservation concern.

Two Demonstration Projects provide an opportunity to apply and refine RCA guidelines while developing practical conservation planning information and assessment tools. One project, such as the Mojave Desert, will represent an ecoregion with a significant amount of existing conservation information. The second project, such as the Modoc Plateau or the Northern California Coast Ranges, will represent an ecoregion with less available conservation information. These demonstration projects will help to establish the critical components required to complete a Regional Conservation Assessment.

A web-based Technology Platform will be created to support the implementation of RCAs across all ecoregions of California. The Data Basin technology platform and associated tools will be used to integrate, manage and provide access to baseline data and conservation assessment products by ecoregion. Existing CDFW data products and models (e.g., ACE II, BIOS, etc.) will feed directly into the system. This platform will support the implementation of regional analyses, and generate standard and customized map products and reports. These functions will be tested and refined through applications in the two demonstration ecoregions.

WCB Process and Decision-making. This initiative will improve WCB's ability to represent conservation values for selected species and ecosystems across an ecoregion, and prioritize areas for conservation action based on opportunity, threat and ecosystem service factors. This system will perform a transparent scientific evaluation of current, as well as past, project proposals in relation to defined conservation objectives. These functions will be identified, tested and refined in partnership with WCB and CDFW.